

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 EUR-12 PM-04 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 CIAE-00
INR-07 NSAE-00 DODE-00 L-03 ACDA-07 AID-05 IGA-02
OMB-01 TRSE-00 SSM-03 /077 W
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R 130704Z FEB 77
FM AMEMBASSY SANA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0391
INFO AMEMBASSY JIDDA
CHUSMTM DHAHRAN
US ARMY SECT RIYADH

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 SANA 0618

E.O. 11652 GDS
TAGS: MASS, YE, SA
SUBJ: AIR DEFENSE OF YEMEN

REF: A. 76 SANA 4413
B. 76 SANA 4346
C. 76 SANA 4220

SUMMARY: SAUDIS APPEAR TO BE CONSIDERING NEW APPROACH TO
MODERNIZING YAR AIR FORCE. IN PART THIS REFLECTS
AWARENESS THAT ORIGINAL PLANS WILL TAKE TOO LONG AND
LEAVE SOVIETS MAJOR SEAT OF INFLUENCE, BUT NEW THINKING
MAY ALSO BE RELATED TO YEMENI CALL FOR HELP IN
"DEFENDING" BAD AL MANDEB FROM ISRAELIS.

1. WE HAVE REPORTED EARLIER (SEE REFTELS) ON
MYSTERIOUS INCURSIONS OF "HOSTILE AIRPLANES" WHICH
YARG LEADERS ANNOUNCED WITH SUCH FANFARE AND LACK
OF PROOF. THERE IS LESS AND LESS READINESS IN SANA
TO ACCEPT EVEN THE CLAIM OF OVERFLIGHTS, MUCH
LESS THE CLAIM THAT YAR POSITIONS WERE STRAFED
AND BOMBED. A DELEGATION OF ARAB AMBASSADORS
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WERE ABRUPTLY SUMMONED THIS WEEK TO MAKE A TRIP
TO BAB AL MANDEB, AND EXPECTED TO BE SHOWN THE
SITES OF THE ATTACK, BUT TRIP AMOUNTED TO A LONG
RIDE THROUGH THE SANDS OF THE TIHAMA INSTEAD.
YEMENIS MADE NO MENTION OF ATTACK OR OVERFLIGHTS.
AMBASSADORS CAME BACK BAFFLED AND VERY DUSTY.
THEY DIDN'T SEE ANY EVIDENCE OF FOREIGN ARAB

ADVISORS (SAUDIS AND JORDANIANS) WHICH AHMED ABDO SA'ID HAD TOLD US ABOUT.

2. ON THE OTHER HAND, STORY IS NOT DEAD. IN LONG INTERVIEW WITH SAUDI MAGAZINE "AL-YAMAMAH" (RE-PRINTED IN LOCAL NEWSPAPER AL THAWRA ON 7 FEBRUARY) PRESIDENT HAMDY WAS ASKED REPEATEDLY ABOUT OVER-FLIGHTS OF "ISRAELI AIRPLANES". WHERE THE PLANES HAD COME FROM (THE QUESTIONER SUGGESTED ETHIOPIA)? HOW DOES YEMEN INTEND TO COUNTER THESE FLIGHTS?

3. HAMDY, WHO TENDS TOWARD THE DELPHIC IN HIS DEALINGS WITH THE PRESS, BEGAN BY OBSERVING THAT BAB AL MANDEB WAS SOUTHERN END OF RED SEA, AND THEN, WITHOUT EVER SAYING (OR DENYING) THAT AIRCRAFT WERE ISRAELI, HE SAID "OUR ENEMIES ARE CONCERNED TO KEEP THE BAB AL MANDEB UNDER CONTINUOUS SURVEILLANCE". (HE SAID THIS WAS CONTINGENCY PLANNING, TO ALLOW "A STRIKE" WHEN THE NEED AROSE). "THE ENEMY IS WELL-KNOWN: ZIONISM AND ISRAEL ITSELF. THEIR HOSTILE INTENTIONS ARE AIMED AT ARABS IN GENERAL AND NOT AT YEMEN IN PARTICULAR. WE ARE READY TO DEFEND OUR TERRITORIES OURSELVES ALTHOUGH WE ALSO DEPEND A GREAT DEAL ON THE COURAGE OF OUR SISTER ARAB STATES AND IN PARTICULAR THE KINGDOM, WHICH PUT ITS ARMED FORCES ON ALERT WHEN WE ANNOUNCED THE BAB AL MANDEB OVERFLIGHTS."

4. IN OUR EARLIER TELEGRAMS WE SPECULATED THAT
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HAMDY MIGHT BE USING (EVEN MANUFACTURING) THESE OVERFLIGHTS TO PROJECT HIMSELF AS A FIGURE ON A LARGER POLITICAL STAGE. WE DIDN'T THINK HE WAS ANGLING PRIMARILY FOR MORE MILITARY EQUIPMENT. HOWEVER, EVENTS MAY BE MOVING IN ANOTHER DIRECTION.

5. ON 8 FEBRUARY, IN TALKS WITH BRIGADIER FALIH DHAHIRI, WHO IS IN CHARGE OF YEMEN MILITARY AID PROGRAM AND MAKING PERIODIC VISIT TO SANA, DCM ASKED IF VISIT LAST MONTH OF SAUDI CHIEF OF STAFF GENERAL KABBANI WAS IN CONNECTION WITH AIR DEFENCE OF YEMEN. DHAHIRI NODDED, BUT WOULD GIVE NO DETAILS. HOWEVER, HE VOLUNTEERED THAT THERE WAS NEED TO ACCELERATE RE-EQUIPMENT AND RETRAINING OF YEMENI AIR FORCE. HE SAID SAUDI POLICY TO DATE HADN'T BEEN VERY EFFECTIVE IN REGARD TO AIR FORCE. SAUDI HAD PUT YEMENIS UNDER PRESSURE TO THROW OUT SOVIET ADVISORS AS FIRST STEP, AND THEN ACCEPT TECHNICIANS AND ADVISORS FROM EITHER EGYPT OR

PAKISTAN. ALL THIS WOULD BE AT SAUDI EXPENSE,
AS WOULD THE PURCHASE OF SPARE PARTS FROM OTHER ARAB
SOURCES. THIS WOULD BE INTERIM SOLUTION, OF COURSE,
UNTIL SAUDI COULD MAKE AVAILABLE F-5'S AND TRAIN
YEMENI PILOTS. SAUDIS GOT NOWHERE WITH THIS
SCHEME, WHICH APPARENTLY APPEARED TO YEMENIS
TO MEAN THEY WOULD BE DEPRIVED OF AN EFFECTIVE
AIR FORCE FOR AN INDEFINITE PERIOD. THEIR AIR
FORCE ISN'T VERY EFFECTIVE NOW BUT THE SOVIETS
KEEP THE PLANES IN THE AIR AND HELP WITH TRAINING.

6. PARTLY BECAUSE OF THIS STAND-OFF, AND PARTLY
BECAUSE SAUDIS JUDGED YAR AIR FORCE TO BE MOST
SOVIETIZED BRANCH OF MILITARY HERE, SAUDIS DECIDED
THAT ONLY WAY TO CREATE A NEW AIR FORCE WHICH THEY
COULD TRUST AND LIKE WOULD BE TO START FROM THE
GROUND UP, SELECTING MEN TO BE TRAINED FROM
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SCRATCH RATHER THAN RE-TRAINING EXISTING YEMENI
PILOTS, MAINTENANCE MEN, ETC.

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7. DHAHIRI, CLEARLY THINKING OUT LOUD, AND SAYING
HE HAD NOT YET PROPOSED IDEA TO HIS GOVERNMENT

OR YARG, SAID HE THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE A GOOD IDEA TO SUGGEST TO YARAF THAT THEY SET ASIDE ONE AIRFIELD FOR THE SAUDIS TO DEVELOP. THAT WOULD MEAN A LOT OF RADAR AND NAVIGATION EQUIPMENT, OF COURSE. SAUDI AIRCRAFT WOULD BE BROUGHT IN ON DEPLOYMENT FOR FAMILIARIZATION OF YARAF PERSONNEL AS WELL AS REGULAR TRAINING. HE THOUGHT THAT IN THIS WAY IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE TO SET UP A PARALLEL AIR FORCE, GRADUALLY LEACHING THE BEST OFFICERS AWAY FROM THE SOVIET OUTFIT.

8. HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE YARG MIGHT THEN TRY TO GET THE SAUDIS TO PICK UP SOME OF THE BURDEN OF DEFENDING THE BAB AL MANBED.

COMMENT: DHAHIRI'S IDEA IS INTRIGUING AS WAY TO BREAK IMPASSE ON YEMENI AIR FORCE MODERNIZATION. DEPLOYMENT HERE WILL NOT TAKE PLACE OF PROVIDING NEW EQUIPMENT DIRECTLY TO YEMENIS, BUT SAUDIS SEEM TO BE PREPARED TO MOVE FASTER ON THAT TOO:

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THIS IS WAY WE INTERPRET SIGNING OF LOA FOR REPLACEMENT F-5'S ANYWAY. IT MAY BE SAUDIS ARE MOVING AEROMODERNIZATION OUT OF SECOND AND INTO FIRST 5 YEAR PART OF THEIR AID PROGRAM HERE. IN ANY CASE, SAUDIS HAVE TAKEN MAJOR STEP AWAY FROM THEIR EARLIER POLICY OF NOT DEALING WITH EXISTING AIR FORCE, AND TRAINING NEW ONE FROM GROUND UP. THAT'S GOOD. WHAT WE FIND EQUALLY INTERESTING IS IDEA THAT SAUDIS MIGHT GET DRAWN INTO DEPLOYMENTS HERE FOR REASONS RELATING TO AIR DEFENSE OF LOWER RED SEA. THEY ALREADY HAVE (OR WILL SOON HAVE) SOME OFFICERS WORKING IN BAB AREA. THIS HAS POSSIBLE LEGAL IMPLICATIONS AND COULD AFFECT EVOLUTION OF TALKS ON SECURITY ASPECTS OF MIDEAST SETTLEMENT. IT IS OF COURSE TOO EARLY TO TELL MUCH ABOUT THESE QUESTIONS BUT WE WANTED TO SIGNAL WHAT COULD BE AN INTERESTING NEW DEVELOPMENT IN THE YEMEN'S SAUDI RELATIONSHIP.

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